BIG JOE WILLIAMS
WILLIE LOVE
LUTHER HUFF

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ALCD
2702

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Photo: David Gahr

Big Joe Williams with Memphis Slim, right, Willie Dixon, left

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In preparing these notes, earlier research done by the following writers has been invaluable: Jim O'Neal, Almost Slim, Vitrice McMurry, Daryl Stolper, Bob Eagle, Gayle Wardlow, Mike Leadbitter, Michael Bloomfield, Jay Bruder, David Evans and Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who,* Da Capo Press, Inc.

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DELTA BLUES—1951

It was late in the afternoon of a cold and blustery tenth of January, 1951, when Luther and Percy Huff arrived at Scott's Radio Service Studio in Jackson, Mississippi to cut some blues for Lillian McMurry and her new Trumpet Records label. The penetrating chill had aggravated Luther's arthritis, a chronic problem since he'd nearly frozen from exposure at Bury, England during the last months of his tour of duty in World War II.

"I was sick that night," Luther remembered, "and she taken me in her car to get some black coffee. And I got okay and went on back down there and played. I was having a chill before I got the coffee."

Luther turned in good, gritty vocals on *1951 Blues* and *Dirty Disposition*, while he and younger brother Percy executed perfectly integrated two-part guitar accompaniments in a style that had become traditional in the Jackson area since first maturing there among folk bluesmen in the 1920's. It was a sound that hadn't been heard much on records since then, when men like Tommy Johnson, Ishmon Bracey, and Charlie McCoy had recorded classics of the genre for Victor. Discs like Johnson's *Big Road Blues* and *Cool Drink Of Water Blues* and Bracey's *Saturday Blues*, all featuring McCoy's delicate mandolin-like second guitar, had been hits in the race record market of 1928 and 1929, presenting the then novel style in performances that would heavily influence the upcoming generation of blues musicians throughout Mississippi. Others who had recorded in the style included Rubin Lacy, Walter Vinson, Wilber "Kansas Joe" McCoy, Slim Duckett and R.D. "Peg Leg Sam" Norwood. As David Evans wrote in *Tommy Johnson*, (Studio Vista, London, 1971)" these men had come to Jackson "from the small towns around the city; they brought their songs and styles and exchanged them with each other. The sound most often heard was that of the string band, a combination of guitars, mandolins, and violins. They may have brought their music from the country, but it was very up to date in Jackson in the 1920's."

By 1951, this sound seemed an anachronism on a commercial blues record. Still, it was an entirely fitting point of departure for the new Jackson-based label. It was a link, a last glance back to the acoustic stylings of an older generation, before the gates would open to release a flood of electrified, jumpin' and jivin' music from the Hep Cats of the Rhythm and Blues scene. Some of the practitioners of the modern styles, like Aleck "Rice" Miller, a/k/a Sonny Boy Williamson, and Willie Love, were actually older than the Huffs, but had kept abreast of, and even helped to generate and evolve the swinging band styles of the Forties into a tough, electric sound that would surge into prominence by way of their new releases on Trumpet as the Fifties unfolded. But these musicians were of course steeped in the older traditions of the Delta, and in fact it was Sonny Boy who had suggested that Luther look up Lillian at her Record Mart for an audition, after cutting his first (unissued) session for Trumpet in late 1950.

Lillian had rehearsed Luther for his first session, suggesting some lyrics for *Dirty Disposition* that gave it more thematic coherence, and asking him to slow the tempo. While she thus may have been trying to help create a more accessible, commercial sound, the slower beat opened up the instrumental space between vocal phrases and gave the performance an even greater resemblance to the old records by Johnson and Bracey, with their measured, majestic tempos. *1951 Blues* couched a lyrical New Year's resolution in a brisker cadence, the two guitars ringing as one in a dazzling display of rhythmic mastery. This was the kind of piece the brothers had used for over twenty years to bring dancers to their feet at parties and picnics throughout Jackson and the Delta.

Had no woman, 1949
I'm gonna find me a woman, boys
Or run my fool self blind

A look at the Huff's life stories helps explain why their records appeared as throwbacks to another era in the midst of a dynamic musical scene. In Luther's own words, "I was born December 5, 1910 in Fannin, Rankin County, Mississippi. I grew up on a farm. I didn't have much of a chance to go to school after my father died, so that's when I started playing the guitar. Percy and I started playing at the Saturday Night Fish Fry." Percy (born November 7, 1912) and Luther had been inspired by their older brother Willie and their cousin Donnee Howard, guitarists who played the country picnics and fish fries around Fannin, allowing the youngsters to spell them occasionally for their first taste of performing. In their teens the pair left home and began roaming the Delta, farming and entertaining.

By 1928, they settled on a large plantation outside Belzoni owned by "Big John." As the only musicians in residence at the time, they soon became quite popular, and Big John himself suggested that the brothers become the official, fulltime musicians for the plantation. As part of the arrangement, they were expected to pay for their replacements in the fields! At least they were given free board, and the opportunity to collect musicians' fees at the many parties and picnics. In an interview with Bob Eagle, Luther recalled the routine at Big John's. As Eagle wrote: "They would start playing each night at about 8:00. They presented the same show whether their audience was white or black. On the first set, which lasted until midnight, they played tangos, two-steps, and waltzes. Only as the evening progressed, as the crowd became ready, would they play blues. After a break until 12:30 for something to eat and drink, their second set lasted until 3 a.m. Luther remembered playing at a picnic at Big John's which lasted for 13 days — and the musicians were expected to keep playing all the time." *(Living Blues*, #22)

Along with this intense musical activity, the brothers met and heard or played with many seminal creators of the blues, among them Charlie Patton (at Inverness, 1929), Howlin' Wolf (Rosedale, 1936), Johnson, Bracey, and McCoy (Jackson, late Twenties), Slim Duckett (who had an especially strong influence on Percy in Jackson), as well as the slightly younger popular area bluesmen like Duckett's stepson Johnny Temple, Houston Stackhouse, Elmore James, and Jimmy Rogers. The Huffs were immersed in this scene until World War II took Luther to Europe in 1942. There he saw service in Liverpool and Bury, Rouen, France, Liege, Belgium, and Nuremberg, Germany as a truck driver with the Army's 5455 Red Balls unit, until his nearly fatal experience at Bury. He was then relegated to the job of company barber before his eventual return home via Fort Dix, New Jersey at the war's end.

Back in Jackson, things had changed. His wartime experiences had broadened Luther's sense of what was possible for a black man in America. He moved to Detroit in 1947, pursuing work at the booming auto plants, and was only in Jackson to visit Percy, who had become a taxicab driver, when he bumped into Sonny Boy, who had married Mattie Jones from Belzoni, a former fan of the Huffs from the days at Big John's.

Luther had just turned 40 when he recorded for Trumpet, and had come to a fork in his life's road; taking the advances from his Trumpet sessions, he would beat his way back North to Detroit, obtain steady work with Chrysler Motors, marry and start a large (12 children) family, and consign his music to a private pasttime. He never attempted to resurrect the old Jackson blues for the taverns of Detroit, where young stars like John Lee Hooker held sway with the aid of wires, microphones, and amplifiers. In 1957, the spinal arthritis that had plagued him since the war became so bad that he was retired with a disability pension, and he spent the last fifteen years of his life living quietly, raising the family with his wife Ledella until a heart attack finally claimed him on November 18, 1973. The pop music of the modern rock era, which owed so much to the blues of Luther's youth, had failed to move the old "musicianer." He went out preferring the old ways, for as he said, "We made songs about the things we saw or about what happened to us—we MEANT it."

It was perhaps this genuineness of emotion that had appealed to Lillian in the first place. The uncompromising lyrical ethic, the sheer musicality of their performances, the lilt in Luther's voice that could express passion, frustration, determination or humor with an exhilarating conviction . . . all these qualities gave the Huffs' music an appeal that carried it beyond the parochial style it was framed in, and probably entranced the neophyte producer into arranging for a second session six weeks after the first. In any event, Lillian was committed to exploring the music all around her, and although she knew the Huffs' sound was commercially unpromising, its fully realized down home strength led her to gamble that perhaps they could make a hit. For the second session, Luther brought his mandolin.

"No one taught me how to play mandolin. I loved it so I bought one and started playing it by myself in 1937," Luther wrote to Daryl Stolper in 1972. Ordering one from a Spiegel's catalogue, the veteran guitarist quickly evolved a guitar-like approach on the smaller instrument, which suited his short fingers. This style included tuning it below standard pitch (customary among bluesmen on all stringed instruments) and fingerpicking it in much the same way as he had the guitar. Although he continued to play guitar, the mandolin became his favorite.

At the February session, the brothers achieved a brooding, intense mood of seething discontent, which was only deepened by Lillian's directive to slow the tempos and lower the vocal pitch. The perfectly interwoven instrumental parts totally blur the distinction between guitar and mandolin, as it becomes virtually impossible to hear the two in separate terms. This superb coordination between instruments was characteristic of the Jackson style. As Evans explained, "Usually each instrument in the group played an equal role, and the various parts were interlocked. There was little subordination or superordination in terms of 'lead', 'bass', or 'chording'." It was also typical for musicians who were primarily guitarists to double on mandolin, and vice versa, making the guitar-like mandolin playing and the mandolin-like guitar playing a major and delightful feature of the music. This was never more apparent than on *Bulldog Blues.* Luther wasn't troubled with the chills this time, and his voice rings with a bristling energy as he proclaims,

Now, I would rather be a bulldog
Goin' from town to town
Than to be here with you baby
Take the stuff you puttin' down

while Percy lets out with a menacing bark in the background and then interjects, "I wouldn't take that stuff, man!"

Lyrically passing through the agonies of rejecting and being rejected by his lover in *Bulldog*, Luther proceeds in the second performance to project his insistent desires onto the longed-for Rosalee.

Now, Rosalee I know your number
Fifty forty-four
If you just say a word, Rosalee
I'll walk up on the third floor

Now, Rosalee, who can your lover be?
Say now, reason I ask you
I wanna know if there's any chance for me

Luther's visit to Jackson had run to nine months at this point. He was too broke to return North and was biding his time with Percy at 501 Brush Street in Jackson. Rosalee was the wife of a friend, and did in fact live on the third floor at 5044 Brush. His singing seems to embody all the frustrations of his dilemma.

As fine as these sides were, hits they were not. Luther soon disappeared, bound for Detroit with the first stirrings of Spring, and Percy resumed driving a taxi around Jackson. Lillian busied herself recording Sonny Boy Williamson, Willie Love, and Elmore James for the blues market. These artists did make hits for Trumpet, and the label began a brief period of commercial success. Trumpet president Willard McMurry gave Luther and Percy boxes of their unsold discs to sell for themselves. In the light of later successes, Lillian was hard put to explain how she had ever come to dabble in an old fashioned sound like the Huffs'. But for ensuing generations of blues lovers, no explanation or apology was necessary.

BIG JOE WILLIAMS

Joe Lee Williams also played in an older style. But his Delta-soaked bottleneck guitar work was fully amplified, and his songs were superbly crafted lyrical vignettes, developed through decades of constant activity as a performer and recording artist. He had a keen commercial sense about his music; he knew what made blues work on records, and what recording companies liked — that subtle combination of originality, familiarity, and a danceable beat. He had already recorded extensively for RCA and Columbia, and his discs were steady sellers. For Joe, the older roots were no commercial liability, they were just one element of a singular musical persona that could sweep listeners along in a torrent of clarion licks and crossrhythms, startling images and pointed observations, sly asides and ringing declarations. It was all underscored by the unique tonalities of his most original invention, the nine-string guitar. His peculiarly constricted vocal timbres lent a kind of urgency to his singing; it sounded as if his spirit, expressed eloquently enough in his lyrics, was yet muffled and muted by the tortures of his experience. For the blues audience of his day, this meant he had a fundamental requirement of the great blues singer: Joe sounded Worried. Whereas he had begun his career using the sobriquet "Po' Joe", his creative magnitude eventually earned him the more appropriate nickname, "Big."

Passing through Jackson on one of many rambles through his home turf in 1951, Joe approached Lillian at The Record Mart as a matter of course. Wearing "overhauls" and a knapsack, he made the appearance of a "bum", yet won a contract immediately on the strength of his on-the-spot audition. Unaware of Joe's history, Lillian was struck with the wit in his lyrics, and with the arresting, engaging sounds of his guitar. Beyond that, he had a presence. Writing about Big Joe nearly thirty years later, rock guitarist Michael Bloomfield registered considerable awe:

> . . . here was a man of stature. There was a great pride in this man, a great strength in this man. And there was poetry. He was a poet of the highways, and in the words of his songs he could sing to you his life. And to hear him talk about Robert Johnson or Son House or Charlie Patton, to hear life distilled from fifty years of thumbing and riding rails and playing joints — to hear of levees and work gangs and tent shows; of madames and whores, pimps and rounders, gamblers, bootleggers, and roustabouts; of circuit-preachers and medicine show men — well, it was something. Because to know this man was to know the story of black America, and maybe to know the story of black America is to know America itself.
> —*ME AND BIG JOE* by Michael Bloomfield with S. Sommerville.. RE/SEARCH Productions, San Francisco, 1980.

As Bloomfield also pointed out, ". . . you could see him as a man, and you could see him as a legend." Joe had worked hard to achieve his legendary status, and like every good storyteller, was fond of embellishing the truth. But as it happened, the facts of his existence were indeed the stuff from which we do make legends.

Joe Lee Williams was born October 16, 1903 on a farm on the edge of the Knoxford Swamp near Crawford, Mississippi, the first child of John "Red Bone" Williams, a Cherokee Indian, and his wife Cora Lee. Hard work and music were a part of his earliest years there, as he began playing a homemade guitar and fife at five, between turns in the fields among his brothers and sisters, who eventually numbered 15. Joe broke out of the farm routine early on, when, with a restlessness that would become typical, he began working in the log and turpentine camps in the piney woods around Crawford at the age of twelve. He discovered that by singing, dancing, and picking, he could make extra money at the fish fries, picnics, and dances. His little circuit carried him into levee and railroad camps, roadhouses and juke joints. The open road led west and north through the Delta, then east and south into Alabama, where he gigged with Doc Bennett's Medicine Show in Mobile as a teen. For a while he worked at Totsie King's joints in Tuscaloosa, then joined the Birmingham Jug Band in the early Twenties. Joe recalled the personnel of this group as Jaybird Coleman, harmonica; "One-Armed Dave" Miles, "Bogus Ben" Covington, Dr. Scott and himself, guitars and mandolins; "New Orleans Slide," washboard, and "Honeycup," jug. Jug bands were in vogue in the Southland of the Twenties, and the group toured for several years with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels tent show, sharing the bill with headliner Ethel Waters and songster Jim Jackson. Barely 20, Joe had established himself as a professional musician, and set a pattern of wandering that would carry him in ever-widening circles across the continent and then the world.

He had already absorbed critical elements of the emerging Delta blues styles during his earliest jaunts. As he sang in *Delta Blues,*

When I first started travelling, travelling
I taken the Delta, man, to be my home

He would have passed through the region many times during the formative years of the early styles (approximately 1917-1925). Around Drew, guitarists and singers like Charlie Patton, Willie Brown, Chester Burnett (Howlin' Wolf), and Tommy Johnson were working out blues patterns on the cotton plantations that would fire the imaginations of several generations of musicians. Here and there throughout the area, similar pockets of local stylings were developing. The young Joe heard it all, and kept on moving, south and west into Louisiana with pianist Little Brother Montgomery, playing the "brothel circuit", and north as far as St. Louis, which would become a favorite base for the next thirty years. There he worked with St. Louis Jimmy Oden at house rent parties and became a fixture on the local scene, playing with Henry Townsend, Walter Davis, Robert Lee "Nighthawk" McCoy, Charley Jordan, and Peetie Wheatstraw. He lived for a while with singer Bessie Mae "Blue Belle" Smith, who had been recording for Okeh for several years. Joe claimed to have recorded with the Birmingham Jug Band at their only session in December of 1930, but it was 1935 before he got his own session, for Bluebird in Chicago. His stays in the northern cities alternated with trips back South; he was hoboing along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and Louisiana with Honeyboy Edwards in '32 and '33, and was playing with Charlie Patton in Humphreys County (where they witnessed an axe murder) shortly before Patton's death in '34. He made many similar forays throughout the Thirties and Forties, usually touching home at Crawford, where many of his relatives continued to live and work. Joe stayed a while in Clarksdale in 1941, and formed a group that included the young Muddy Waters to play Delta jukes. At this point, Joe had already made a hit with his original, *Baby, Please Don't Go,* was recording regularly as both singer and accompanist to such new stars as John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, and had become a major influence on the generation of bluesmen who would soon begin recording in the modern electric styles.

Williams' first coupling for Trumpet, recorded solo at Scott's that September, was *Delta Blues/Mama Don't Allow Me.* The songs derive in part from earlier hits, the older classic *Drop Down Mama* by Sleepy John Estes, and the more recent *Boogie Chillen* and *Hobo Blues* by John Lee Hooker, and show how, in the fraternity of bluesmen, cross-influences continued to produce new variations on communal themes. According to veteran harpman Hammie Nixon, Big Joe was a regular visitor to Brownsville, Tennessee on weekends in the Thirties. There was a popular fish fry downtown on Saturday afternoons, attended by hundreds, where local bluesmen like Estes and Nixon, and John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, were joined by visitors like Too Tight Henry Castle from Memphis, Aleck "Rice" Miller (Sonny Boy II), and Big Joe. The musicians would gather tips, make contacts for parties out in the country later that night, and patronize the bootleggers who hung out on the fringes — all under the supervision of a white cop. It was here that Joe probably learned Sleepy John's *Drop Down Mama,* a 1935 hit for Estes on Decca. Adapting it for his Trumpet recording, Joe added rhythmic and lyrical elements from Hooker and infused it with his own dynamic touch. Lillian quickly summoned Joe back for a second session that December.

The enthusiastic young producer had planned an ambitious session, to be held at the local musicians' union hall. She hoped to record new titles by her entire roster of contracted blues talent, along with several hillbilly artists. Bill Harvey came down from Memphis to help line up and rehearse musicians, and Bill Holford of ACA came from Houston to attend the engineering. When the white local union bosses realized the preponderance of black artists involved, they began to "get nasty," as Lillian recalled. "I wasn't going to have those musicians harassed. I went out and rented the Cedars of Lebanon Club." The union in Jackson was strictly segregated at the time — blacks were not admitted as members, nor did they have a union of their own. The entire proceedings were relocated to the temporarily vacant club hall. For four days and three nights, Lillian presided over an astounding parade of artists. "From stress and exhaustion, I lost my voice and couldn't talk for three months. However, out of the 42 sides we cut, we had eight sides that were hits." Amidst a sea of headaches that featured seven hours trying to wring an original performance out of Sherman "Blues" Johnson (who was stuck obstinately in a Cecil Gant mode), and placating Mose Allison and his Baton Rouge band while they waited in vain for no-show Tiny Kennedy, Joe's straightforward, flawless performances stood out to reveal his true professionalism, as he recorded six titles in less than an hour.

T.J. Green, Willie Love's fine bassplayer from Greenville (who also helped out at Willard McMurry's furniture store), laid down flowing, responsive and propulsive accompaniments on these 6 blues. The two were probably no strangers; Little Milton Campbell recalls Green as a major figure on Greenville's Nelson Street scene at the time, and Williams would have passed through often ("I'm goin' down in Greenville, boys, I'm gonna peep up on that Greyhound board" — *Delta Blues).* Green shows a special sensitivity to Joe's rhythmic and structural quirks, and is particularly adept at gradually speeding the tempos along with him. The songs mix traditional scraps with personal motifs that crystallize the Delta musical ethos. *Juanita,* for instance, appears to descend from Jackson's Johnny Temple and his 1936 hit, *Louise Louise Blues,* with its time-honored couplet,

I believe somebody been fishin' all in my pond
Been catchin' all my perches and dryin' up the bone

But Williams takes liberties with the usual 12-bar format, adroitly accelerates the tempo, and throws in one of the oldest blues refrains of all in place of Temple's chorus:

Juanita, baby where you stayed all night?
Yeah, you come home this mornin', clothes
ain't fittin' you jus' right

Sleepy John also reworked this theme in his 1937 recording *Vernita Blues.* It begins to appear that the source for these pieces was a common pool whose folk origins predate all three versions.

Williams' treatment of the Broke Down Auto theme shows fresh imagery among the many clever allusions in *Overhauling Blues*, based on Sonny Boy I's *My Little Machine*. On the flip side of *Overhauling*, Lillian put a truly original classic, *Whistling Pines*. Joe unleashes a flurry of flustered exclamations about a deceiving sweetheart from Down Home:

> Boy, *if a woman tell you she love* you
> *Man, don't never pay that no mind*
> *You know she don't do nothin' but every Saturday*
> *night she run around*
> *Way down by Whistlin' Pines*

Whistling Pines was the name of a club in Crawford. Amazingly, the record garnered a good rating in the R&B reviews of *Cashbox* magazine, judged solely on its commercial appeal. "Joe Lee Williams sings a boogie tempo southern style item with a potent 12-string (sic) guitar backing," enthused the review, alongside up-to-the-minute accounts of the latest releases by the young stars Johnny Ace and Dinah Washington. Joe's music was surviving in style, thanks to the revived taste for downhome blues that characterized the black record market of the time.

She Left Me A Mule features infectious rhythms in a rendition that would influence many upcoming bluesmen; released on Trumpet 171, b/w *Bad Heart Blues*, it became Joe's best-selling Trumpet disc. *Mule* echoes Estes' song *You Shouldn't Do That*, while *Bad Heart* combines elements from Sonny Boy I's *Million Year Blues* and *Mattie Mae Blues*. Clearly, Joe's close association with his blues brothers in Brownsville and elsewhere was as essential an influence to his music as the shared roots and his own personal creativity. But in the end, as David Evans says, "it all comes out pure Big Joe."

During the next few years, a familiar scenario was played again and again. Big Joe would arrive in Jackson on a cloud of dust, usually on a Greyhound Bus as well, and call 39309 for Miss Lillian. Lillian would direct her house cook to prepare three or four days worth of food, bag it up, and send it over with Willard. As often as not, all three McMurry's (including young Vitrice, known to Big Joe as Little Miss) would deliver the vittles along with Joe's current royalty check, down to the Greyhound depot. The tough but gentle troubador would charm the child, thank his patrons, and board the next bus to Greenville or Memphis or St. Louis or Chicago or New Orleans, assured of several good meals and the funding for his next round, room, and board.

The Sixties brought Joe a new found celebrity and wider sphere of influence as a member of the elder generation of folk blues artists who began playing to a new audience, the white middleclass youth of America and Europe. New recordings on the Delmark label gained Joe immediate recognition among young blues fans, who drew him into the folk music renaissance along the East Coast. He played Yale University, Gerde's Folk City in New York, Carnegie Hall, and toured Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival. He continued to record prolifically over the ensuing decade, appearing in numerous documentary films with a spruced-up image. This was the Big Joe that Mike Bloomfield encountered at the Chicago nightclub called The Blind Pig in the early Sixties:

> He was a short and stout and heavy-chested man, and he was old even then. He wore cowboy boots and cowboy hat and pleated pants pulled way-up high, almost to his armpits. Just visible above the pants was a clean white shirt, and a tiny blue bow tie dotted his bullish neck.

But the songs were the same uncompromising stuff, and the 9-string guitar continued to insist itself on listeners with the same hypnotic power. White boys like Bloomfield and Bob Dylan would try in vain to copy his licks, but Joe had them bamboozled with his extra strings and crazy tunings. He loved to sit by the hour with them, drink beer, and spin tales of the blues life while they puzzled over his fingerings and bathed him in adulation. To the bright and literate youngsters, Joe was an icon, and his blues spoke of worlds undreamed-of:

> He couldn't read or write a word of English, but he had America memorized. From 60 years of hiking roads and riding rails he was wise to every highway and byway and roadbed in the country, and wise to every city and county and township that they led to. Joe was part of a rare and vanished breed — he was a wanderer and a hobo and a blues singer, and he was an awesome man. —*Me & Big Joe*

By the time he passed away at the age of 79, he had been recognized across the world as one of the premiere bluesmen of the century. Perhaps just as significantly for Joe, he had been honored with an officially proclaimed Big Joe Day back in Crawford, where he spent much time in his last years, the prodigal son returned home after an odyssey of nearly seven decades, basking in the sun near his birthplace, ruminating on his life as an adventurer, storyteller, and musicmaker. The Blues, the high times, and the open road had all been exceptionally good to Joe, and he gave us a glimpse of it with a timeless artistry that endures in hundreds of recordings. These eight from Jackson are certainly among the finest.

WILLIE LOVE & HIS THREE ACES

The music of Willie Love & His Three Aces brings another dimension of the Delta scene into focus. Love's great friendship with Sonny Boy Williamson II and their adventures together were detailed in the notes to Trumpet AA-700, *Clownin' With The World*. By the time of his 1951 sessions, Willie was a highly popular entertainer throughout the Delta. He had started gigging back in the 30's with Barber Parker's Silver Kings out of Tunica, and spent the 40's touring the little towns with his own pick-up bands, playing joints like The Harlem Club in Arcola or the Matinee and "49" Clubs in Drew. He had a way of combining the best traditional elements with scraps of his own invention; he knew many of the older blues hits, and when he played them he added a certain polish that seemed to modernize them without sacrificing their basic downhome appeal. Burl Carson, a resident of Greenville during Willie's heyday, described him as "the best piano player in town then. A little more uptown; a little more classy." He cut a dapper figure with his sportcoat and spats, and could dance as he sang and played for the people, calling out encouragement to his sidemen as he coaxed rollicking and irresistible rhythms out of the ivories. Sonny Boy was one of the few bluesmen that Willie would take a secondary role to; usually he was heading his own unit, comprised of the best and freshest talent around.

Willie's first single for Trumpet *(Take It Easy, Baby/Little Car Blues)* sold well, and Lillian called him back to Scott's Studio in July of '51 to cut another 4 titles. This time, along with tenor saxman Otis Green, who had contributed wailing backup on the first session, he brought along the killer combination of Joe Willie Wilkins and Elmore James on electric guitars. Both were veterans of the Delta scene, but whereas Wilkins had gigged extensively with Sonny Boy throughout the 40's, James had spent 2½ years in the Navy during the war, sailing to Guam with his guitar to help preserve democracy. When he returned to his former home in Belzoni, he found that his family had moved back to the hill country around Canton, where Elmore was born in 1918. There he caught up with his brother Robert, who was running a radio repair shop. Robert initiated Elmore into the secrets of electrification, thus providing the missing ingredient that brought James' guitar work out of the shadows. He was soon gigging with Sonny and Willie on their radio shows and at the many nightclubs and picnics, and began building a reputation as an innovative sideman with other well known bluesmen like Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, Charley Booker, Johnny Temple, and Boyd Gilmore. The combination of Wilkins' and James' stunning guitars and the tempestuous sax of Green alongside some very spirited drumming (probably by Alex Wallace), made this one of Love's most memorable set of Aces. Unfortunately, two of the titles from this session, *V-8 Ford* and *Nelson St. Blues*, failed to pass muster with Lillian and were re-recorded that Fall with different backing. But *Everybody's Fishing* (a standby first waxed by Memphis Minnie in '32 and later popularized by Bumble Bee Slim on his 1935 Bluebird release) b/w *My Own Boogie*, a churning instrumental with a few familiar verses scattered throughout, became Willie's second Trumpet release. Wilkins provides a torrid boogie line while Elmore pounds out plangent power chords and chokes ringing, bent blue leadlines from his uniquely adapted electric. His trademark sound is already easily identifiable, thanks to personal modifications worked out with his electrician brother and refined by Elmore during quiet hours at his own radio repair shop in Jackson. This was the sound that excited the hip young Delta audiences, and had them hopping at the jukes all up and down the line as the 50's commenced. A few days later, James would return to the studios to cut his classic *Dust My Broom*, a blues landmark that for many would signify the start of a new era. But the state of Mississippi was teeming with young talent, and when Willie Love returned for his third session in December, he had another whole new set of Aces up his sleeve.

To firm up the foundation laid down by his left hand, Willie had T.J. Green from Greenville, whose lithe and loping bass backed Joe Williams so well. In a clearly subservient role, teenager Junior Blackman ticked out tasteful time on drums. And in the Amen Corner, fulminating for all he was worth on his humble Silvertone, was a promising rookie from around Leland, Little Milton Campbell. All of 17, Milton had impressed Willie with his brassy, aggressive attack. He had learned much from his mentor, Joe Willie. But where Wilkins was inclined to be reserved, almost bashful at times, Milton loved the limelight and would gladly lead out with bold, almost fierce pride whenever his teacher allowed at Love's club and radio gigs around Greenville. On several of the cuts from this session, the guitar nearly overwhelms the other instruments, but is so effectively self-assured that it lifts the performances. The best balance is struck on *Shady Lane Blues*, a Leroy Carr tune from his 1934 Vocalion release. The performance is heightened suddenly by Campbell with an astonishing solo that delivers the blues past to the present, then sends the whole tradition hurtling into the future with a totally controlled, passionate stroke of group genius. Obviously enjoying the moment, Willie shouts, "Well, all right! Pick it, Milton!" and the torch is passed. Milton's talents would help to lead and comfort another generation of blues people through several decades of turmoil and triumph, providing part of the soundtrack for the move from oppression towards social equality. Willie Love would soon die the bitter and premature death of an alcoholic, but his musical sensibilities would survive in the work of youngsters like Little Milton, who learned their lessons well at the feet of the brilliant oldtimers. This was the Delta blues at its most vigorous and creative — transforming the old, transcending the moment, and transmuting the sadness and anger so unflinchingly stated — nothing less than the celebration of life itself, for all its stark, penetrating sorrows and raving lunacies. Willie mixes in a final verse taken from Carr's *Blues Before Sunrise:*

> *I just love my baby, but my baby won't behave*
> *I'm gonna get me a hard shootin' pistol, boys*
> *and put her in her grave*

It mattered little that the words came from an already dim past, from an urbanized blues record made by a long-dead singer from Indianapolis. This was as much a Delta blues as Big Joe's *Whistlin' Pines*. The overriding factors — emotional relevance, rhythmic dynamism, collective musical communion — served to uplift the soul while affirming a seemingly ugly and damnable reality. These were the Delta Blues of 1951.

In *74 Blues*, Willie sang of escaping for good, riding the rails to the fabled North, with lyrics again borrowed from Johnny Temple *(Gonna Ride No. 74* from 1938 on Decca). But in real life, his short stays in Detroit or Chicago always ended with his return to his home in the Delta. There he would continue to knock out lovable and diverting, if frivolous boogies like *21 Minutes to 9* and *Vanity Dresser Boogie* along with his deeper blues numbers, at the clubs along Nelson Street, for a little while longer. Little Milton would attend Willie's funeral in 1953, a full-fledged recording artist in his own right. Junior Blackman would evolve into the outstandingly inventive drummer who graced the classic 1954 Trumpet session that produced Sonny Boy's *Clownin' With The World* and *Shuckin' Mama*. And T.J. Green would vanish into an undeserved obscurity. In the evershifting scenes of the Delta blues, it mattered little. There would always be new singers, new musicians, and old themes being restated in new ways. It had been this way since before anyone could remember, since before even Big Joe, and it would be this way, for as long as anyone cared to guess.

— Marc Ryan

BIG JOE WILLIAMS & HIS 9-STRING GUITAR

1. Delta Blues 2:37
2. Mama Don't Allow Me 2:37

Scott's Radio Service, Jackson, Mississippi, September 25, 1951. Joe Lee Williams vocals & guitar.

3. She Left Me A Mule 2:25
4. Bad Heart Blues 2:39
*5. Juanita 2:30
*6. Friends & Pals 2:29
7. Over Hauling Blues 2:40
8. Whistling Pines 2:26

Cedars of Lebanon Club, Jackson, Mississippi, December 3, 1951. Joe Lee Williams, vocals and guitar; T.J. Green, bass.

**Previously Unreleased*

#1-2-5-7 compositions (Public Domain)
#4-6-8 compositions, (Globe Music BMI) (Williams)
#3 composition, (Tradition Music BMI) (Williams)

LUTHER HUFF

9. 1951 Blues 2:34
10. Dirty Disposition 2:37

Scott's Radio Service, Jackson, Mississippi, January 10, 1951. Luther Huff, vocals & guitar; Percy Huff, guitar.

11. Bull Dog Blues 2:43
12. Rosalee 2:25

Scott's Radio Service, Jackson, Mississippi, February 21, 1951. Luther Huff, vocals and mandolin; Percy Huff, guitar.

#9 through 12 compositions (Public Domain) (Huff)

WILLIE LOVE & HIS THREE ACES

13. Everybody's Fishing 2:14
14. My Own Boogie 2:55

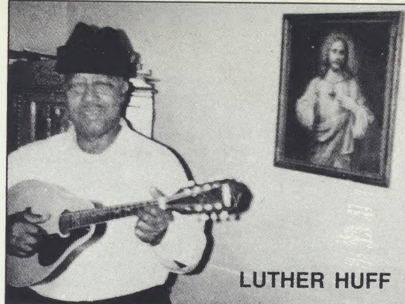
Scott's Radio Service, Jackson, Mississippi, July 25, 1951. Willie Love, vocals and piano; Elmore James, guitar & vocal chorus #13; Joe Willie Wilkins, guitar & vocal chorus #13; Otis Green, tenor sax, #14; unknown, (probably Alex Wallace,) drums.

15. 74 Blues 2:54
16. Shady Lane Blues 2:44
17. 21 Minutes To Nine 2:27
18. Vanity Dresser Boogie 2:22

Musician's Union Hall, Jackson, Mississippi, December 1, 1951. Willie Love, vocals & piano; Little Milton Campbell, guitar; T.J. Green, bass; Junior Blackman, drums.

#13 (Public Domain) #14 (Public Domain) (W. Love)
#15 (Tradition Music BMI) (Temple-Love)
#16 (Public Domain) (Carr)
#17 & 18 (Globe Music BMI) (W. Love)

ALCD 2702



LUTHER HUFF

PHOTOS: *Front Cover:* Willie Love in a Greenville nightclub, circa 1950. *Back Cover:* Luther Huff, Detroit, 1970. *Inlay:* Big Joe Williams with Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon, 1958, Copyright David Gahr.

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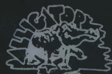
DELTA BLUES — 1951



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